

ORSETT BRIEFING PAPERS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

NO.16 - EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology "is concerned with the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validation and the 'possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be. In short, claims about how what is assumed to exist can be known'" ¹. While it can be summarised thus: "By 'epistemology' I mean the form which our understanding or knowledge takes, the assumptions which underlie it and the methods we use to establish it" ².

Aristotle distinguished between three types of knowledge - those things independent of the observer (theoretical - eg: theology, mathematics, natural sciences), those things which depend on the observer who can effect change in them (practical - eg: ethics, economics, politics), and those things produced by the observer (productive - eg: "mechanical" arts like building and navigation) ^{3 4}. But "in psychology, epistemology is complicated because of the complex nature of our subject matter" ⁵.

An epistemology attempts to explain certain elements:

- The nature of the object to be known.
- The relation of the knower/observer to the object.
- The method by which to know the object.

¹ Bryman, A (2001) Social Research Methods. Oxford: Oxford University Press, quoted in Grix, J (2001) Demystifying Postgraduate Research: From MA to PhD. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press.

² Stevens, R (1996) Trimodal theory as a model for inter-relating perspectives in psychology. In Sapsford, R (ed) Issues for Social Psychology. Milton Keynes: Open University; p77.

³ Copeland, R & Sluiter, I (2009) (eds) Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Historically, "power lies not just in being able to reproduce a scheme of knowledge that is invested with traditional authority, but in participating in the enterprise that such schemes represent: to theorise and understand cognition itself" (op cit Copeland & Sluiter p7).

⁵ op cit Stevens p78.

POSITIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY

The basis of science and the scientific approach to psychology is referred to as a positivist/empiricist epistemology ⁶. It makes the following assumptions about knowledge ⁷ :

1. The world (or social world) exists independent of the observer, and through scientific methods it can be objectively discovered and laws established to explain and predict it ⁸.
2. There is a distinction between the objective world ("facts") and the subjective world of the observer ("values"). The researcher must put aside the latter to understand the former.
3. The objectivity of knowledge is established by independent observers agreeing on the findings of the common system of measurement (eg: the scientific method).
4. The application of the correct method to research is the requirement of a good study, and reflection upon this method is of limited use. Findings from this method are viewed as a-contextual (ie: not specific to the time and place of discovery and thus can be generalised), and the method is value-free ⁹.

OTHER EPISTEMOLOGIES

Positivist epistemology has been subsequently questioned by other epistemological approaches. Science "is a social practice, and that therefore what it says and what it does is significantly located within that context" ¹⁰ ¹¹. Thomas Kuhn ¹² challenged the idea that

⁶ Nomothetic is a term also used here - "aimed at establishing causal laws" (op cit Stevens).

⁷ Usher, R (1996a) A critique of the neglected epistemological assumptions of educational research. In Scott, D & Usher, R (eds) Understanding Educational Research London: Routledge.

⁸ "Most experimental social psychologists are optimistic about the possibility of true knowledge of an independently existing real world. Their optimism arises from the value placed on science and its scope for ferreting out the truth. It is argued that reliable and valid (true) knowledge can be attained about the real nature of social life and people's psychology if the right procedures are followed. We can obtain an objective view of a world that exists independently of our observations. Indeed, false observations will be disconfirmed by evidence collected through observation and experimentation" (Wetherell, M & Still, A, 1996, Realism and relativism. In Sapsford, R (ed) Issues for Social Psychology Milton Keynes: Open University ; p105). This is sometimes called a realist view (as opposed to relativist one).

⁹ The positivist epistemology is also classed as cognitivist (ie: individuals perceive the world and add meaning to that in the brain or mind) as opposed to mutualist (ie: social meaning exists in the world and individuals take this in as they perceive the world).

¹⁰ op cit Usher (1996a) p9.

¹¹ Van Langenhove (1995) referred to "scientism" - "the borrowing of methods and a characteristic

science is somehow transcendent of its time and place ¹³.

This view can be seen in the hermeneutic/interpretive epistemology ¹⁴. It challenges assumptions 1 and 2 of the positivist epistemology in particular. There is no distinction between the objective and subjective. The world can only be known through the interpretation of the subjective observer. This epistemological approach also places emphasis on the meaning of behaviour rather than the statistical measurement of it (which is another characteristic of the positivism epistemology) ¹⁵.

A third epistemological approach is that of critical theory ¹⁶, which challenges the 4th assumption of the positivism epistemological approach especially. The method used to study behaviour carries assumptions about power and norms. Thus the critical epistemological approach is "emancipatory - the unmasking of ideologies that maintain the status quo by restricting the access of groups to the means of gaining knowledge and the raising of consciousness or awareness about the material conditions that oppress or restrict them" ¹⁷. "The question became 'why this kind of knowledge claim at this period in history?' rather than 'Is this idea true or false?'" ¹⁸.

The post-modern epistemological approach opposes the positivist approach by questioning whether anything can be fully known. It challenges the idea of "grand narratives" (ie: over-arching theories) in particular. "What it focuses on however is not the world which is

vocabulary from the natural sciences in order to discover causal mechanisms that explain psychology phenomena" (quoted in Gross, R, 1997, New paradigms for old Psychology Review September, 20-22). (Van Langenhowe, L, 1995, The theoretical foundations of experimental psychology and its alternatives. In Smith, J.A et al (eds) Rethinking Psychology London: Sage).

¹² Kuhn, T (1970) The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹³ Even Comte, who is seen as the originator of positivism, accepted that science is not outside of history of culture: "The history of science is science itself" (Comte, A, 1974, Course in positive philosophy. In Andreski, S (ed) The Essential Comte London: Croom Helm; quoted in Devalle, D, 1996, Da Capo: Science and social psychology. In Sapsford, R (ed) Issues for Social Psychology Milton Keynes: Open University).

¹⁴ Hermeneutic - "This is borrowed from biblical studies where it refers to the unravelling of distortions imposed on a text by time and by translation" (op cit Stevens p81).

¹⁵ Bhaskar argued for a combination of positivist and interpretive epistemologies (Bhaskar, R, 1989, Reclaiming Reality London: Verso). "For Bhaskar, reality is ontologically stable and thus any description we make of it does refer to an intrinsic phenomenon, but epistemologically unstable. Thus our knowing of reality is always subject to social and political arrangements which are transitive" (Scott, D, 1996a, Methods and data in educational research. In Scott, D & Usher, R (eds) Understanding Educational Research London: Routledge; p63).

¹⁶ Eg: Habermas, J (1972) Knowledge and Human Interactions London: Heinemann.

¹⁷ op cit Usher (1996a) p23.

¹⁸ op cit Wetherell & Still p110.

constructed and investigated by research but the way in which that world is written, inscribed or textualised in the research text" ¹⁹.

The characteristics of this epistemology are an emphasis on difference and change, an avoidance of dichotomies and reification ²⁰, and relativism ²¹.

Feminist epistemology can be seen as critical or post-modern, both or neither of them. It has certain characteristics ²²:

a) So, "instead of being committed to truth and objectivity as privileged by both positivist and interpretive perspectives, feminism can argue for the insight that all discourses create subjects, objects, regimes of power and truth" ²³.

b) "Knowledges" should be reflexive (ie: aware of their own context and development).

c) The knower is not separate from the knowledge.

d) All knowledge is associated with a "political position".

e) Gender categories/divisions are a fundamental means by which knowledge is structured.

f) Feminist research seeks to uncover power relations.

Another epistemology is known as "transformational", and it links to psychology as "moral science" "concerned to facilitate possibility through encouraging reflection as a basis for action" ²⁴ (eg: humanistic psychology).

CRITICAL ISSUES

One issue is whether the natural science model (as used in physics and chemistry, for example) is appropriate for studying the social world. There are four

¹⁹ op cit Usher p31.

²⁰ This is "presenting abstract concepts as if they are 'things' with a concrete existence" (op cit Gross p21).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Usher, P (1996) Feminist approaches to research. In Scott, D & Usher, R (eds) Understanding Educational Research London: Routledge.

²³ op cit Usher, P p129.

²⁴ op cit Stevens p82.

positions that can be taken ²⁵:

i) Positivist - The natural science model is appropriate to use to study the social world.

ii) Post-positivist - Different criteria are needed to study the natural and social world.

iii) Post-modernist - No criteria are appropriate for studying the social world.

iv) Post-structuralist - New criteria are needed for each study of the social world ²⁶.

The way that reality is presented (through language) in a "text" is a representation (for positivist epistemology) or is reality itself (for critical epistemology).

Positivist and interpretive epistemologies assume a dualism exists between what is inside a "text" and "outside" (reality). Thus the truth of a text can be checked "by going back to the reality it is about and independently sampling it" ²⁷. But for critical epistemology there is no distinction - "whatever is 'outside' can only be made knowable by being already 'inside'" ^{28 29}. The critical epistemology moves away from truth as "a matter of epistemology, of satisfying a correspondence theory of truth" to truth as "the outcome of many different social practices" ³⁰.

If there is only "text", then the process by which the text has come to be produced (textuality) is important. There are four aspects of this to consider ³¹:

a) "Con-text" - The "situated autobiography of the researcher/reader" ³² - ie: the text has been created by an individual (or individuals), and it has not come into existence by itself. The individual(s) producing the text needs to be aware of their "biases" in this process through reflexivity.

²⁵ Denzin, N & Lincoln, Y (1994) (eds) Handbook of Qualitative Research London: Sage.

²⁶ Scott, D (1996b) Making judgments about educational research. In Scott, D & Usher, R (eds) Understanding Educational Research London: Routledge.

²⁷ Usher, R (1996b) Textuality and reflexivity in educational research. In Scott, D & Usher, R (eds) Understanding Educational Research London: Routledge; p43.

²⁸ Ibid p43.

²⁹ Eg: Derrida, J (1987) Positions London: Athlone Press.

³⁰ op cit Usher (1996b) p44.

³¹ Ibid.

³² op cit Usher (1996b).

b) "Pre-text" - Language is seen not as a neutral vehicle to convey representations of reality, but as a means to construct reality. This is sometimes called "linguaging" ³³. The text will also make use of language to justify itself (eg: "objective evidence", "scientific method") and give the text authority.

c) "Sub-text" - "Beneath" the text are claims to authority based on power relations (eg: the scientist knows better than the participant) ³⁴.

d) "Inter-text" - This refers to "the place of history in textual production - the way in which history is inserted into the text and particular texts into history" ³⁵ (ie: knowledge is not decontextualised).

"One specific way in which power operates in the production of knowledge is through the over-generalisation of claims based on findings that necessarily are situation-specific. The emphasis on knowledge that is situation-specific leads to use of the plural: different knowledges produced in different situations" ³⁶. This is nicely summarised by the term "situated knowledges" ³⁷.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

The phenomenological approach can be seen as a way to resolve conflicts between epistemologies because, as Edmund Husserl ³⁸, the founder of phenomenology emphasised, "all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, lies in everyday experience, or what he called the lifeworld" ³⁹. "Whatever activity we engage in, whether practical, theoretical, or other, is pursued within the lifeworld, whose simple acceptance proves an essential precondition of every activity" ⁴⁰.

"The goal of phenomenological enquiry is to fully describe a lived experience. It stresses that only those who have experienced phenomena can communicate them to

³³ op cit Usher (1996b).

³⁴ Foucault, M (1980) Power/Knowledge Brighton: Harvester Press.

³⁵ op cit Usher (1996b) p47.

³⁶ Hollway, W (2012) Social psychology: past and present. In Hollway, W et al (eds) Social Psychology Matters (2nd ed) Milton Keynes: Open University; p48.

³⁷ Haraway, D.J (1991) Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature London: Free Association Books.

³⁸ Eg: Husserl, E (1970/1900) Logical Investigations London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

³⁹ Still, A (1996) Theories of meaning. In Sapsford, R (ed) Issues for Social Psychology Milton Keynes: Open University; p96.

⁴⁰ Gurwitsch, A (1974) Phenomenology and Theory of Science Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press; p114 (quoted in op cit Still p96).

the outside world..., and therefore answers questions of meaning in understanding an experience from those who have experienced it" ⁴¹.

The lifeworld is a key concept, and is described as having seven elements ("fractions") ⁴²:

- Selfhood - identity.
- Sociality - relationships with others.
- Embodiment - feelings about own body.
- Temporality - "sense of time, duration, biography" ⁴³.
- Spatiality - "geography of places" ⁴⁴.
- Project - activities that are central to an individual's life.
- Discourse - the language used to describe life.

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⁴¹ Roberts, T (2013) Understanding the research methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis British Journal of Midwifery 21, 3, 215-218; p215.

⁴² Ashworth, P (2003) An approach to phenomenological psychology: The contingencies of the lifeworld Journal of Phenomenological Psychology 34, 2, 145-154.

⁴³ Ibid p149.

⁴⁴ Ibid p149.

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